THE WAY OF A MAN

By EMERSON HOUGH

CHAPTER XVI.

The Betrothal.

STRENGTH came to us as we had need, and gradually even the weaker of us two became able to complete the day's journey without the exhaustion it at first had cost her. Summer was now upon us, and the heat at midday was intense, although the nights, as usual, were cold. Deprived of all pack animals except our dog, we were perforce reduced to the lightest of gear, and discomfort was our continual lot. Food, however, we could still secure, abundant meat and sometimes the roots of plants which I dug up and tested, though I scarce knew what they were. We moved steadily on toward the west and northwest, but although we crossed many old Indian trails, we saw no more of these savage travelers of the plains.

It would be bootless to pass beyond Laramie into the mountains, and our next course, I thought, must be toward the south. I did not know that we were then perhaps a hundred miles or more northwest of Laramie, deep in a mountain range far north of the transcontinental trail. For the time, however, it seemed wise to tarry here for rest and recruiting. I threw down the pack. "Now," said I to her, "we rest."

"Yes," she replied, turning her face to the south. "Laramie is that way now. If we stop here my father will come and find us. But, then, how could he find us, little as we are, in this big country? Our trail would not be different from that of Indians even if they found it fresh enough to read. Suppose they never found us!"

"Then," said I, "we should have to live here forever and ever."

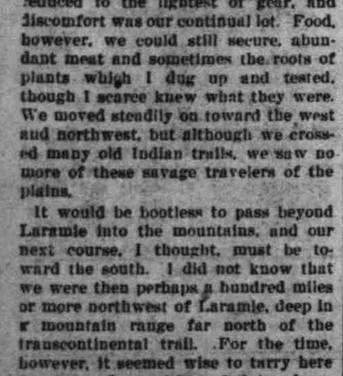
She looked at me curiously. "Could we?" she asked.

"Until I was too old to hunt, you too weak to sew the robes or cook the food."

"What would happen then?"

"We would die," said I. "The world would end, would have to begin all over again and wait twice ten million years until man again was evolved from the amoeba, the reptile, the ape. When we died this dog here would be the only hope of the world."

It was understood that we should stay here for at least two days, to mend our clothing and prepare food for the southern journey. The next day



"What is marriage, John Cowles?" she asked of me.

she came to me as I sat by our meager fireside. Without leading of mine she began a manner of speech until now foreign to her.

"What is marriage, John Cowles?" she asked of me, abruptly, with no preface.

"It is the plan," I answered apathetically. She pondered for a time.

"Are we, then, only creatures, puppets, toys?"

"Yes," I said to her. "A man is a toy. Love was born before man was created, before animals or plants. Atom ran to atom, seeking. It was love." She pondered yet a while.

"And what is it, then, John Cowles, that women call 'wrong?'"

"Very often what is right," I said to her, apathetically. "When two love the crime is that they shall not wed. When they do not love, the crime is when they do wed."

"But without marriage," she hesitated, "the home"—

"It is the old question," I said. "The home is built on woman's virtue, but virtue is not the same where there is no home, no property, where there is no society. It is an artificial thing, born of compromise, and grown stronger by custom of the ages of property owning man."

I saw a horror come across her eyes. "What do you say to me, John Cowles? That what a woman prizes is not right, is not good? No, that I shall not think!" She drew apart from me.

"Because you think just as you do, I love you," I said.

"Yet you say so many things. I have taken life as it came, just as other girls do, not thinking. It is not nice. It is not clean, that girls should study over these things. That is not right."

"No; that is not right," said I dully.

"Then tell me what is marriage, that one thing a girl dreams of all her life. Is it of the church?"

"It is not of the church," I said.

"Then it is the law."

"It is not the law," I said.

"Then what is it?" she asked. "John Cowles, tell me what makes a wedding between two who really and truly love? Can marriage be of but two?"

"Yes," said I.

"But there must be witnesses, there must be ceremony, else there is no marriage," she went on. Her woman's brain clung to the safe, sane groove which alone can guide progress and civilization and society—that great, cruel, kind, imperative compromise of marriage without which all the advancement of the world would be as naught. I loved her for it. But for me, I say I had gone savage. I was at the beginning of all this, whereas it remained with her as she had left it.

"Witnesses?" I said. "Look at those!" I pointed to the mountains. "Marriages, many of them, have been made with no better witnesses than those."

My heart stopped when I saw how far she had jumped to her next speech.

"Then we two are all the people left in the world, John Cowles? When I am old will you cast me off? When another woman comes into this valley, when I am bent and old and cannot see, will you cast me off and, being stronger than I am, will you go and leave me?"

I could not speak at first. "We have talked too much," I said to her presently. But now it was she who would not desist.

"You see, with a woman it is for better, for worse, but with a man"—

"With a Saxon man," I said, "it is also for better, for worse. It is one woman."

She sat and thought for a long time. "Suppose," she said, "that no one ever came."

Now with swift remorse I could see that in her own courage she was feeling her way, haltingly, slowly, toward solution of problems which most women take ready solved from others. But, as I thank God, a filmy veil, softening, refining, always lay between her and reality. In her intentness she laid hold upon my arm, her two hands clasping.

"Suppose two were here, a man and a woman, and he swore before those eternal witnesses that he would not go away any time until she was dead and laid away up in the trees, to dry away and blow off into the air and go back"—

"Into the flowers," I added, choking.

"Yes, into the trees and the flowers—so that when she was dead and he was dead and they were both gone back into the flowers, they would still know each other forever and ever and never be ashamed—would that be a marriage before God, John Cowles?"

What had I brought to this girl's creed of life, heretofore always so sweet and usual? I did not answer. She shook at my arm. "Tell me," she said, but I would not tell her.

"Suppose they did not come," she said once more. "It is true, they may not find us. Suppose we two were to live here alone all this winter, just as we are now, none of my people or yours near us. Could we go on?"

"God! Woman, have you no mercy!"

She sat and pondered for yet a time as though seriously weighing some question in her mind.

"But you have taught me to think, John Cowles. It is you who have begun my thinking, so now I must think. I know we cannot tell what may happen. I ask you, John Cowles, if we were brought to that state which we both know might happen—if we were here all alone and no one came, and if you loved me—ah, then would you promise forever and forever to love me till death did us part—till I was gone back into the flowers? I remember what they say at weddings. They cling one to the other, forsaking all others, till death do them part. Could you promise me in that way? Could you promise me, clean and solemn? Because I would not promise you unless it was solemn and clean and unless it was forever."

It seemed that I saw into her heart. I dropped my hands from my eyes and looked at her strangely, my own brain in a whirl, my logic gone. All I knew was that then or elsewhere, whether or not rescue ever came for us, whether we died now or later, there or anywhere in all the world, I would, indeed, love her and her only, forsaking all others until, indeed, we were gone back into the sky and flowers, until we whispered again in the trees, one unto the other. Marriage or no marriage, together or apart, in sickness or in health—so there came to me the stern conviction—love could knock no more at my heart, where once she had stood in her courage and her cleanness. Reverence, I say, was now the one thing left in my heart. Still we sat and watched the sun shine on the distant white topped peaks. I turned to her slowly at length.

"Ellen," I said, "do you indeed love me?"

"How can I help it, John Cowles?" she answered bravely. My heart stopped short, then raced on, bursting all control. It was long before I could be calm as she.

"You have helped it very long," I said at last quietly. "But now I must know. Would you love me anywhere, in any circumstances, in spite of all? I love you because you are You, not because you are here. I must be loved in the same way always."

She looked at me now silently, and I leaned and kissed her full on the mouth.

She did not rebel or draw away, but there was that on her face, I say, which left me only reverent. Her hand fell into mine. We sat there plighted, plighted in our rags and misery and want and solitude. Though I should live twice the allotted span of man, never should I forget what came into my soul that hour.

After a time I turned from her and from the hills and from the sky and looked about us at the poor belongings with which we were to begin our world. All at once my eye fell upon one of our lighter robes, now fairly white with much working. I drew it toward me, and with her still leaning against my shoulder I took up a charred stick, and so laboriously I wrote upon the surface of the hide these words of our covenant:

"I, John Cowles, take thee, Ellen Meriwether, to be my lawful wedded wife, in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, till death do us part."

And I signed it and made a seal after my name.

"Write," said I to her; "write as I have written."

She took a fresh brand blackened at the end and in lesser characters wrote slowly letter by letter:

"I, Ellen Meriwether, take thee, John Cowles, to be my lawful, wedded husband"— She paused, but I would not urge her, and it was moments before she resumed—"in sickness and in health, for better or for worse"— Again she paused, thinking, thinking and so concluded, "till death do us part."

"It means," she said to me simply as a child, "until we have both gone back into the flowers and the trees."

I took her hand in mine. Mayhap book and bell and organ peal and vestured choir and high ceremony of the church may be more solemn, but I, who speak the truth from this very knowledge, think it could not be.

"When you have signed that, Ellen," I said to her at last, "we two are man and wife, now and forever, here and any place in the world. That is a binding ceremony, and it endows you with your share of all my property, small or large, as that may be. It is a legal wedding, and it holds us with all the powers the law can have. It is a contract."

"Do not talk to me of contracts," she said. "I am thinking of nothing but our—wedding."

Still mystical, still enigma, still woman, she would have it that the stars, the mountains—the witnesses—and not ourselves, made the wedding. I left it so, sure of nothing so much as that, whatever her way of thought might be, it was better than my own.

"But if I do not sign this?" she asked at length.

"Then we are not married."

She sighed and laid down the pen. "Then I shall not sign it—yet," she said.

I caught up her hand as though I would write for her.

"No," she said; "it shall be only our engagement, our troth between us. This will be our way. I have not yet been sufficiently wooed, John Cowles!"

I looked into her eyes and it seemed to me I saw there something of the same light I had seen when she was the masked coquette of the army ball—the yearning, the melancholy, the mysticism, the challenge, the invitation and the doubting—ah, who shall say what there is in a woman's eye! But I saw also what had been in her eyes each time I had seen her since that hour. I left it so, knowing that her way would be best.

"When we have escaped," she went on, "if ever we do escape, then this will still be our troth, will it not, John Cowles?"

"Yes, and our marriage when you have signed, now or any other time."

"But if you had ever signed words like these with any other woman, then

Again she paused, and so concluded "Till death do us part."

it would not be our marriage nor our troth, would _____ Cowles?"

"No," I said. And then I felt my face grow ashy cold and pale in one sudden breath!

"But why do you look so sad?" she asked of me suddenly. "Is it not well to wait?"

"Yes, it is well to wait," I said. She was so absorbed that she did not look at me closely at that instant.

Again she took up the charred stick in her little hand and hesitated. "See," she said, "I shall sign one letter of my name each week until all my name is written! Till that last letter we shall be engaged. After the last letter, when I have signed it of my own free will and clean and solemn—clean and solemn, John Cowles—then we will be—Oh, take me home—take me to my father, John Cowles! This is a hard place for a girl to be."

Suddenly she dropped her face into her hands, sobbing.

She hid her head on my breast, sore distressed now. She was glad that she might now be more free, needing some manner of friend, but she was still—what? Still woman! Poor Saxon I must have been had I not sworn to love her fiercely and singly all my life. But yet—

I looked at the robe, now fallen loose upon the ground, and saw that she had affixed one letter of her name and stopped. She smiled wanly. "Your name would be shorter to sign a little at a time," she said, "but a girl must have time. She must wait. And see," she said, "I have no ring. A girl always has a ring."

This lack I could not solve, for I had none.

"Take mine," she said, removing the ring with the rose seal. "Put it on the other finger—the—the right one."

I did so, and I kissed her. But yet—

She was weary and strained now. A pathetic droop came to the corners of her mouth. The palm of her little hand turned up loosely as though she had been tired and now was resting. "We must wait," she said, as though to herself.

But what of me that night? When I had taken my own house and bed beyond a little thicket that she might be alone, that night I found myself breathing hard in terror and dread, gazing up at the stars in agony, beating my hands on the ground at the thought of the ruin I had wrought, the crime that I had done in gaining this I had sought.

I had written covenants before! The strength and sweetness of all this strange new life with her had utterly wiped out my past, had put away as though forever the world I once had known. Until the moment Ellen Meriwether began the signing of her name I swear I had forgotten that ever in the world was another by name of Grace Sheraton. I may not be believed—I ought not to be believed—but this is the truth, and the truth by what measures my love for Ellen Meriwether was bright and fixed, as much as my promise to the other had been ill advised and wrong.

Far rather had I been beneath the sod that moment, for I knew, since I loved Ellen Meriwether, she must not complete the signing of her name upon the scroll of our covenant!

CHAPTER XVII.

The Loss of Paradise.

THE question of food ever arose for settlement, and early the next morning I set out upon a short exploring expedition. There were trout in our little mountain stream, and although we had no hooks or lines, I managed to take a few of these in my hands, chasing them under the stones. I shook the bullet pouch at my belt and found it light. We had barely two dozen bullets left, and few hunters would promise themselves over a dozen head of big game for twice as many shots. I cast about me in search of red cedar that I might make a bow. I searched the willow thicket for arrow shafts and prowled among little flints and pointed stones on the shores of our stream seeking arrow points. It finally appeared to me that we might rest here for a time and be fairly safe to make a living in some way. Then, as I was obliged to admit, we would need to hurry on to the southward. But again fate had its way with us, setting aside all plans. When I returned to our encampment, instead of seeing Ellen come out to meet me as I expected, I found her lying in the shade of the little tepee.

"You are hurt!" I cried. "What has happened?"

"My foot," said she, "I think it is broken!" She was unable to stand. Walking along the stony creek bank she had slipped, and her moccasined foot, caught in the narrow crack between two rocks, had been held fast as she fell forward.

So now it was my turn to be surgeon. Tenderly as I might, I examined the foot, now badly swollen and rapidly becoming discolored. In spite of her protest, although I know it hurt me more than herself, I flexed the joints and found the ankle at least safe. Alas! A little grating in the smaller bones, just below the instep, told me of a fracture.

"Ellen," said I to her, "the foot is broken here—two bones, I think, are gone."

She sank back upon her robe with an exclamation as much of horror as pain.

"What shall we do?" she murmured. "I shall be crippled! I cannot walk! We shall perish!"

"No," I said to her; "we shall mend it. In time you will not know it has happened." Thus we gave courage to each other.

Now, when she was thus helpless and suffering, needing all her strength, how could I find it in my heart to tell her that secret which it was my duty to tell? How could I inflict upon her a still more poignant suffering than this physical one? Each morning I said to myself: "Today, if she is better, I will tell her of Grace Sheraton. She must know." But each time I saw her face I could not tell her.

Each day she placed a clean white pebble in a little pile at her side. Presently there were seven.

"John Cowles," she said to me that morning, "bring me our writing, and bring me my pen. Today I must sign another letter." And, smiling, she did so, looking up into my face with love showing on her own. Had the charcoal been living flame and had she written on my bare heart she could not have hurt me more.

On the fifth week she called once more for her charcoal pen and signed the last letter of her Christian name.

"See, there," she said; "it is all my girl name, E-l-l-e-n." I looked at it, her hand in mine.

"Ellen!" I murmured. "It is significant enough, because you are the only Ellen in the world." But she put away my hand gently and said, "Wait."

She asked me now to get her some sort of cut branch for a crutch, saying she was going to walk. And walk she did, though resting her foot very little on the ground. After that daily she went farther and farther, watched us as I paddled for trout in the stream, aided me as I picked berries in the thickets, helped me with the deer I brought into camp.

"You are very good to me," she said, "and you hunt well. You work. You are a man, John Cowles. I love you."

But hearing words so sweet as these to me, still I did not tell her what secret was in my soul. Each day that other world seemed vaguer and farther away.

Each day, too, it seemed less worth while to speak. Now I could not endure the thought of losing her.

One day we wandered in a dense berry thicket, out of which rose here and there chokecherry trees, and we began to gather some of these sour fruits for use in the pemmican which we planned to manufacture.

All at once our dog began to growl and erect his hair, sniffing not at the foot scent, but looking directly into the thicket just ahead. He began then to bark, and as he did so there rose, with a sullen sort of grunt and a champing of jaws like a great hog, a vast yellow-gray object, whose head topped the bushes that grew densely all about. The girl at my side uttered a cry of terror and turned to run as best she might, but she fell and lay there cowering.

The grizzly stood looking at me vindictively with little eyes, its ears back, its jaws working, its paws swinging loosely at its side, the claws white at the lower end, as though newly sharpened for slaughtering. I saw then that it was angered by the sight of the dog and would not leave us. Each moment I expected to hear it crash through the bush in its charge. Once down in the brush, there would be small chance of delivering a fatal shot, whereas now, as it swung its broad head slightly to one side, the best possible opportunity for killing it presented itself immediately. Without hesitation I swung up the heavy barrel and drew the small silver bead directly on the base of the ear where the side bones of a bear's head are flatter and thinner, directly alongside the brain. The vicious crack of the rifle sounded loud there in the thicket, but there came no answer in response to it save a crashing and slipping and a breaking down of the bushes as the vast carcass fell at full length. The little ball had done its work and found the brain.

We were two savages, successful now in the chase—successful, indeed, in winning the capital prize of all savages, for few indians will attack the grizzly if it can be avoided. She laid her hand wonderingly upon the barrel of the rifle, looking at it curiously, that it had been so deadly as to slay a creature so vast as this. Then she leaned contentedly against my side, and so we sat there for a time. "John Cowles," she said, "you are very much a man. I am not afraid when you are with me." I put my arm about her. The world seemed wild and fair and sweet to me. Life, savage, stern, swept through all my veins. We were very busily engaged in cutting up the slaughtered grizzly, when all at once we stopped and looked at each other in silence. We had heard a sound. To me it sounded like a rifle shot. We listened.

It came again, with many others. There was a volley of several shots, sounds certain beyond any manner of question. Her eyes were large and startled. I caught her bloody hand in my bloody one, and for an instant I believed we both meditated flight deeper into the wilderness.

"It may not be any one we know," I said. "It may be Indians."

"No," said she, "it is my father. They have found us. We must go! John"—she turned toward me and put her hands on my breast—"John!" I saw terror and regret and resolve look out of her eyes, but not joy at this deliverance. No, it was not joy that shone in her eyes. None the less the ancient yoke of society being offered, we bowed our necks again, fools and slaves, surrendering freedom, joy, content, as though that were our duty.

Silently we made our way toward the edge of the thicket where it faced upon the open valley.

Almost as we paused I saw coming forward the stooping figure of an Indian trailer, half naked, belegginged, moccasined, following our fresh tracks at a trot.

I carefully covered him with the little silver bead, minded to end his quest. But before I could estimate his errand or prepare to receive him closely in case he proved an enemy, I saw approaching around a little point of timber other men, white men, a half dozen of them, one a tall man in dusty garments, with boots and hat and gloves.

And then I saw her, my promised wife, leave my side and limp and stagger forward, her arms outstretched. I saw the yoke of submission, the covenant of society, once more accepted.

"Father!" she cried.

They gathered about us. I saw him look down at her with half horror on his face. Then I noticed that she was clad in fringed skins, that her head covering was a bit of hide, that her hair was burned yellow at the ends, that her foot coverings were uncouth, that her hands and arms were brown where not stained red by the blood in which they had dabbled. I looked down also at myself and saw then that I was tall, brown, gaunt, bearded, ragged, my clothing of wool well nigh gone, my limbs wound in puttee bands of hide; my hands large, horny, blackened, rough. I was a savage now drawn from my cave. I dragged behind me the great grizzled hide of the dead bear clutched in one hairy hand. And somber and sullen as any savage, brutal and silent in resentment at being disturbed, I stared at them.

"Who are you?" demanded the tall man of me sternly, but still I did not answer. The girl's hands tugged at his shoulders. "It is my friend," she said. "He saved me. It is Mr. John Cowles, father, of the Virginia Cowles family. He has come to see you"—But he did not hear her or show that he heard. His arm about her, supporting her as she limped, he turned back down the valley, and we others followed slowly.

Presently he came to the rude shelter which had been our home. Without speaking he walked about the camp, pushed open the door of the little ragged tepee and looked within. The floor was very narrow. There was one meager bed of hides. There was one fire.

"Come with me," he said at length to me. And so I followed him apart, where a little thicket gave us more privacy.

"You are John Cowles, sir, then?" he said to me at length quietly. "Lieutenant Belknap told me something of this when he came in with his men from the east."

I nodded and waited.

"Are you aware, sir, of the seriousness of what you have done?" he broke

"Father!" she cried.

out. "Why did you not come on to the settlements? What reason was there for you not coming back at once to the valley of the Platte? Here you are, a hundred miles out of your way, where a man of any intelligence, it seems to me, would naturally have turned back to the great trail. Hundreds of wagons pass there every day. There is a stage line with daily coaches, stations, houses. A telegraph line runs from one end of the valley to the other. You could not have missed all this had you struck south. A fool would have known that. But you took my girl"— He choked up and pointed to me, ragged and uncouth.

(Continued Next Saturday)

LONDON, Eng., June 24.—Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst, the militant suffragette, who was sentenced on May 22 at the Old Bailey Sessions to nine months' imprisonment on the charge of conspiracy, was released today from Holloway Jail, owing to her health breaking down on account of the hunger strike which she and her imprisoned followers began recently.

Mrs. Pethick Lawrence was also released from Holloway jail this afternoon. Miss Annie Kenney, who has been directing the Woman's Social and Political Union during the imprisonment of the suffragist leaders, announces that Mrs. Pankhurst was released because she was found last night to be at the point of death. All attempts forcibly to feed her had failed.

Reginald McKenna, Home Secretary, admits that Mrs. Pankhurst's heart was too weak to permit of forced feeding.